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Table of Contents

Cover.....	1
SF 298.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Body.....	4
Key Research Accomplishments.....	7
Reportable Outcomes.....	7
Conclusions.....	7
References.....	8
Appendices.....	

Introduction

Proteins containing a Caspase-Associated Recruitment Domain (CARD) have previously been shown to serve as key regulators of tumor cell survival as well as regulators of other cellular processes, such as cytokine production. Interleukin-1 beta (IL-1 β) is a pro-inflammatory cytokine which has been found to be associated with more aggressive and invasive breast tumors (Jin, Yuan et al. 1997), (Kurtzman, Anderson et al. 1999). Previous work (years 1 and 2) focused on the initial cloning and functional characterization of NAC-X (now named CLAN), a novel protein containing CARD, NACHT and LRR domains. NAC-X was found to regulate caspase-1 and IL-1 β activation, and to also affect the functions of other NACHT-containing proteins via heterotypic associations through its NACHT domain. Furthermore, NAC-X was found to elicit an inflammatory response in macrophages following exposure to the bacterial component LPS, suggesting a role for this gene in the innate immune system. In the final year of this fellowship, NAC-X was found to induce an immune response (IL-1 β secretion) from macrophages following exposure to bacterial infection. It was also discovered that NAC-X protects cells from bacterial infection and in some cases may cause the host cell to die in response to bacterial invasion.

Body

Specific Aim 1:

Specific Aim 1 of this research project was to determine the expression pattern of NAC-X in normal and malignant mammary tissues as well as in normal human tissues. Tasks 1 and 2 were completed during the first year of the award (screening of NAC-X expression and cloning of full-length NAC-X, respectively). The goal of Task 3 was to generate a polyclonal antibody against NAC-X for use in immunoblotting or immunohistochemistry. The first peptide used for immunization failed to produce a viable NAC-X antibody. A second attempt using a different peptide resulted in an antibody which is capable of detecting over-expressed, but not endogenous, NAC-X using western blotting. This antibody is, however, capable of immunoprecipitating CLAN.

Specific Aim 2:

The goal of Specific Aim 2 was to evaluate the associations of NAC-X with other CARD-containing proteins involved in apoptosis. This aim was completed in year 1, leading to the discovery that NAC-X associated with caspase-1, Nod1, Nod2, and NAC. NAC-X was also found to oligomerize with itself through its NACHT (nucleotide-binding) domain. In an effort to expand on this specific aim, the ability of the NACHT domain of NAC-X to mediate binding to other NACHT family proteins was investigated. The NACHT domain of NAC-X was found to hetero-oligomerize with the NACHT domains of Nod2, NAC, and cryopyrin (as well as other proteins within this family, data not shown) but not to several proteins lacking a NACHT domain.

Specific Aim 3:

Specific Aim 3 was to determine the specific step(s) in apoptosis pathways regulated by NAC-X. Work in year one determined that NAC-X does not significantly affect BAX- or fas-mediated cell death but does enhance caspase-1-mediated apoptosis. Another pathway by which cells regulate gene expression and survival is through the activation of the NF- κ B transcription complex. Since the Nod proteins have been shown to be inducers of NF- κ B, (Inohara, Koseki et al. 1999), (Ogura, Inohara et al. 2001), we next investigated the potential effects of NAC-X on this signaling pathway. It was found that NAC-X was capable of inhibiting Nod1- and Nod2-mediated NF- κ B activation in a dose-dependent manner. Since NAC-X and Nod2 are both expressed in monocytes, these proteins may actually play more of a role in the inflammatory process than in apoptosis, as the more recent literature would suggest (Inohara, Ogura et al. 2001).

Specific Aim 4:

The goal of Specific Aim 4 was to analyze the importance of the NAC-X gene for cell survival/cell death *in vivo*. Since recent data has pointed to a role for CLAN in the activation of caspase-1/interleukin-1 β , as opposed to its direct involvement in apoptosis, a monocytic cell line over-expressing the full-length NAC-X gene was generated. To accomplish this, a retrovirus was utilized to introduce epitope-tagged NAC-X into THP-1 cells which were subsequently selected for stable expression using G418. To evaluate the effects of NAC-X on the function on monocytes/macrophages, the secretion of endogenous interleukin-1 β (IL-1 β) was examined by ELISA following treatment with bacterial lipopolysaccharide (LPS), a known inducer of this cytokine in macrophages. It was found that NAC-X enhances the secretion of this pro-inflammatory cytokine. Additionally, infection of THP-1/NAC-X cells with pathogenic bacteria (*Salmonella Enteritidis* and *Salmonella Typhimurium*) resulted in enhanced secretion of IL-1 β when compared to THP-1/Neo control cells (figure 1). Conversely, a THP-1 cell line expressing a NAC-X specific RNAi hairpin construct (and subsequently lower levels of endogenous CLAN) was shown to have a IL-1 β secretion defect in the same experiments. NAC-X also inhibited the ability of *Salmonella* species to replicate within macrophages, indicating an additional anti-bacterial role for this protein in the innate immune response (figure 2). Finally, NAC-X was found to sensitize macrophages to *Salmonella*-induced cell death following infections using a higher MOI (multiplicity of infection). To further investigate whether or not caspase-1 was involved in this phenomenon, cells were pre-treated with the caspase-1 inhibitor z-WEHD-fmk or the pan-caspase inhibitor z-VAD-fmk prior to bacterial exposure. Interestingly, cell death mediated by NAC-X seemed to be independent of caspase-1 but dependent on the function of other caspases (figure 3).

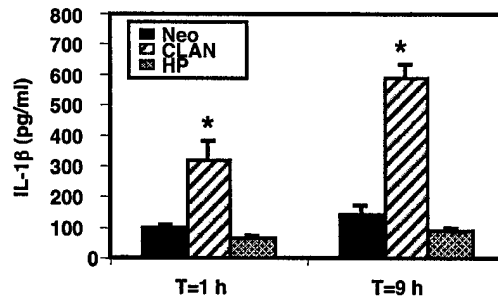


Figure 1. NAC-X (CLAN) mediates IL-1 β secretion from macrophages following bacterial infection. THP-1 cells expressing NAC-X (CLAN), a RNAi hairpin construct specific for NAC-X (HP), or control cells (Neo) were exposed to *Salmonella enteritidis* (at MOI=5) and supernatants collected at t= 1hr and 9hr. Levels of secreted active IL-1 β were determined by ELISA.

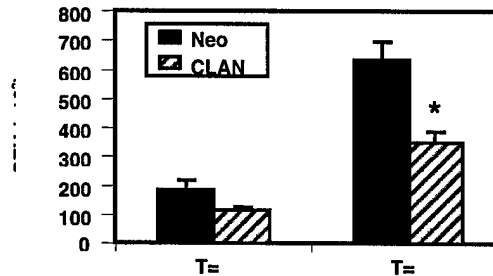


Figure 2. NAC-X inhibits the ability of *Salmonella* to replicate within macrophages. THP-1 cells over-expressing NAC-X (CLAN) or control cells (Neo) were exposed to *Salmonella* for 1hr, extracellular bacteria was killed using gentamycin, and cells were lysed in 1% triton-X or incubated for an additional 8hr at 37° C. Lysates were spread on LB-agar plates and amounts of intracellular bacteria were determined through CFU numbers.

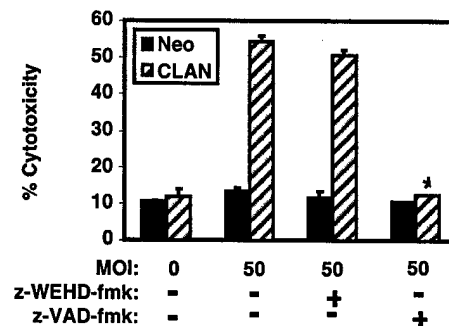


Figure 3. NAC-X sensitizes monocytes to bacteria-induced cell death independently of caspase-1. THP-1 cells were pre-treated with caspase-1 inhibitor z-WEHD-fmk or pan-caspase inhibitor z-VAD-fmk, then were infected with *Salmonella*. Cell death was quantitated through the measurement of LDH release.

Key Research Accomplishments (final year)

*NAC-X was found to mediate IL-1 β secretion from macrophages following pathogenic bacteria infection.

*It was determined that NAC-X induces anti-bacterial effects within infected macrophages and thus plays an important role in the innate immune system.

*NAC-X was found to sensitize macrophages to cell death following infection by high levels of bacteria, a process discovered to be independent of caspase-1.

Reportable Outcomes

Damiano JS, Oliveira V, Welsh K, Reed JC. Heterotypic interactions among NACHT domains: implications for regulation of innate immune responses. *Biochemical Journal*, April 2004 in press.

Jason S. Damiano, Christian Stehlik, Frederick Pio, Adam Godzik, and John C. Reed. Cloning and Characterizaion of CLAN, a novel CED-4 homolog which regulates caspase-1 activity. Dept. Of Defense Breast Cancer Research Program Meeting, 2002.

Conclusions

During the first year of research, NAC-X was successfully cloned and found to be expressed in a number of human tissues, including breast cancer cell lines. Due to its homology with the cell death regulator Apaf-1, NAC-X was initially believed to play a role in determining apoptotic susceptibility in human cells. However, subsequent experiments determined that it was actually a regulator of caspase-1, a caspase not usually involved in apoptosis. This caspase is known to control the cleavage and secretion of pro-IL-1 β , a pro-inflammatory cytokine that is key to the innate immune response and possibly associated with a more aggressive breast cancer phenotype. Work done during the initial 2 years lead to the successful generation of a polyclonal antibody against NAC-X. Studies found that NAC-X may affect other similarly structured proteins (of the NACHT family) through interactions mediated by its NACHT domain. Experiments utilizing monocytic cell lines stably expressing NAC-X demonstrated that this protein is capable of mediating cytokine release following stimulation with bacterial components such as LPS. Finally, NAC-X was found to enhance the release of IL-1 β following bacterial infection, to inhibit the ability of bacteria to successfully replicate within macrophages, and to sensitize macrophages to death mediated by high amounts of bacteria. Further studies utilizing NAC-X -over-expressing breast cancer cell lines will determine whether or not NAC-X is a mediator of IL-1 β secretion in breast tumors. In conclusion, NAC-X is a regulator of the pro-inflammatory cytokine IL-1 β , which is known to be an important element of the innate immune response and possibly a survival/growth factor for breast cancer cells.

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